

## The International News Report Dilemma of CGTN: Analyzing its Reporting of Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro's Death

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**Abstract:** The article compares CGTN's (China Global Television Network) video report of "Fidel Castro's death" with "Nelson Mandela's death", analyzing CGTN's two pairs of factors such as the number of reports, frequency, content, and foreign media overlap, studying the reporting logic behind it. Looking at the report on the death of Mandela, there are several problems, such as the report being lopsided, following the foreign media, and lacking a Chinese "national position". Observing reports on the death of Castro, the situation is different. This issue reflects the dilemma of Chinese official media in cross-cultural communication. The article makes data analysis and content analysis on these two news reports of CGTN, and interprets the reasons behind this difference. China's international cross-cultural communication still lacks its national position. It is necessary to improve Chinese official media's communication capabilities.

**Keywords:** International communication, CGTN, Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro

### 1. CGTN's Reports on Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro's Death

In the early morning of November 26th, 2016, Raul Castro made a televised speech, announcing bad news to the Cuban people and the world—Cuban revolution leader Fidel Castro died on the evening of Nov. 25th. CGTN immediately broadcast the news in a newsletter and broadcast Raul's televised speech for a total of 1 minute and 31 seconds. After that, the host jumped to other news. There was not much inkling about the reports of Castro.

Searching "Castro" as a keyword with time sort on www.CGTN.com and filtering out non-CGTN TV programs, there were 49 related reports on Nov. 26th. Most of them only stayed at the level of news report, nothing more than four news points: one is the death of Castro, the other is that chairman Xi Jinping sent the message of condolence, the third is that Castro experienced assassination attempts 634 times in his life, the fourth is that people in Cuba and other places bid farewell to Castro. However, the contribution Fidel Castro gave to China, to the development of Sino-Cuban relations, and the emergence of a good communist leader were rarely described in detail.

Compared to the overwhelming reports of Mandela's death in 2013, the reports on Castro can be said to be pitiful.

CGTN broadcast the news of Mandela's death for half an hour. Some scholars pointed out that "the anchor of big Media announced the news in a slow and sad tone. It took a half-hour to review Mandela's life in the news section, which was originally dozens of minutes long. The whole program constantly emphasized Mandela's struggle for freedom and equality, especially

ethnic reconciliation. The studio connected the reporter in the United States, which for the first time conveyed the spirit of US President Barack Obama’s mourning speech. The whole introduction lasted for several minutes, almost full-text translation.” (Wang, 2014, p.31-33)

After researching and comparing the reporting of the two events, it can be found that CGTN’s reporting framework for the death of Mandela and the death of Castro follows the established world communication order and lacks its unique national position.

Table 1. CGTN’s Daily Report Frequency on Death of Mandela

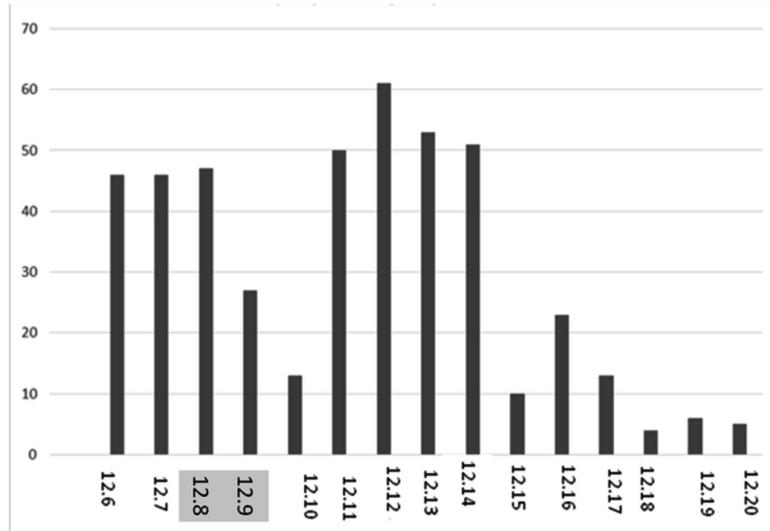
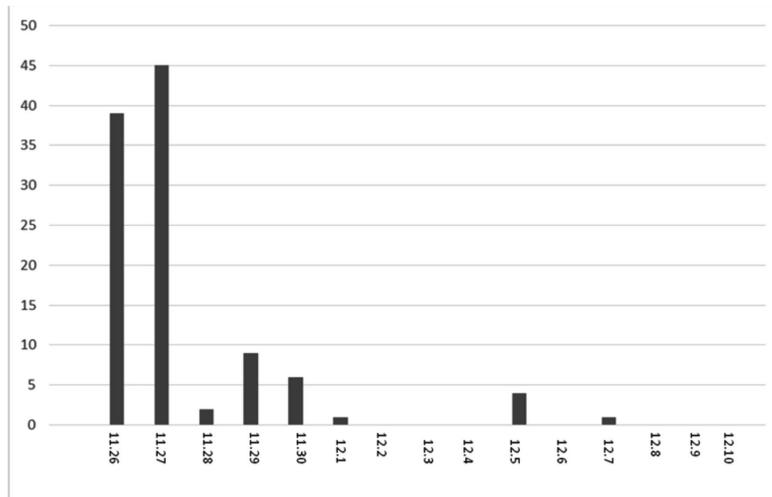


Table 2. CGTN’s Daily Report Frequency on Death of Castro



Tables 1 and 2 show CGTN's reporting on the death of Mandela and the death of Castro, using the same reporting cycle, from the day of death to the 16th day after death. The reporting period and reporting intensity of Mandela's death were significantly longer and greater than Castro's. The former experienced two peak periods, one was Mandela's death, the other was Mandela's funeral; the latter has only one peak period—Castro died. As for Castro's funeral, CGTN only reported this simply; during the following days, there was no longer much coverage for Castro. As for the report of Mandela, although there was a decline, it still maintained a high degree of attention. It is obvious that the reports on Mandela, both in number and duration, are completely beyond the reports of Castro. What is the reason behind this?

## 2. The Values Embodied in the Reporting Framework

The setting of the agenda from Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion* (1922) put forward that "the media may be very unsuccessful in telling people 'how to think', but very effective in telling people what they want." The reporting framework theory comes closer to characterizing today's situation that "the media not only tells us what to think, but they also tell us what to think through the report framework." (McCombs, 2014, p.84)

According to the framework theory, the news media tends to construct issues in a variety of different ways, which adopt a centralized organizational approach to provide background for news content and propose central issues through selection, intensification, exclusion, and careful handling.

American sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) believes that "the framework is used to explain the cognitive structure of the external objective world. People rely on a certain framework for the induction, structure and interpretation of real life. The framework enables people to locate, perceive, understand and generalize massive specific information" (p. 84). In the field of journalism, the framework uses more choices and structures. Chinese scholar Guo Qingguang (2001) puts forward that "the framework for the application of media organizations to the selection of news and the process of processing news texts constitutes a 'news framework'" (p. 209). Professor Li Xiguang (2011) believes that the news framework reflects "news values, ideology and editorial reporters' stereotypes" (p. 23-27). The importance of the news reporting framework is evident. The existence of the framework is implicit. It sets the media's issues without any traces, and guides the audience's views on a certain issue, while at the same time subtly instilling a certain culture and values into the people.

## 3. International News Reporting Framework

International communication is divided into two aspects, one is internal (internal audience) communication, and the other is external (foreign audience) communication. In-house dissemination of foreign news could "let domestic people know about the situation of other countries and regions in the world, better understand the outside world as well as the development and changes of the international community." External communication focuses on letting foreigners know about their own conditions and publicity, and functions to maintain the image of the country. International Communication "has a specific republic nation reference

system that serves the political process of a particular nation-state” (Shi & Wang, 2016, pp. 86-88), which is an important part of a country’s cultural soft power.

Since the new century, the international communication ability of Chinese media has rapidly increased. “The number, length, layout, and genre of international news reports are rich and varied, continuing to improve. But they still lack the ability to export values with Chinese characteristics, and sometimes even contain endorsement by foreign media.” Furthermore, Chinese media’s reports on international news “lack a clear Chinese stance, the ability to set agendas, and the ability to frame news reports... From a micro perspective, it is often based on the presuppositions of Western media, unconsciously falling into the news agenda trap of others’ design.” Comparing to American media, “The international news report is constructed with a US-centered, perfect capitalist system, self-proclaimed that its democratic system is an example for other societies.” (Li, 2011, pp. 23-27) In terms of international communication, there is a lack of independent international reporting and even a lack of obvious national positions. This is evident in the comparison of CGTN’s news reports of Castro and Mandela’s death.

#### **4. International News Communication and Dissemination Order**

In the international news dissemination order, developing countries represented by China are still in a relatively weak position: “the old order of international information dissemination is still playing a role.” (Yan & Liu, 2015, p.104) As early as 1980, The International Commission for the Study of Communications Problems (also known as McBride Commission) of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) adopted and published the most important academic literature in the field of contemporary international communication – “Many Voices, One World”, also known as “The McBride Report”. The report is a result of three years of research on the structure and communication resources of the world’s information infrastructure. It reflects the position, viewpoints and reasonable requirements of the developing countries on the structure of equality and fairness in many aspects. In the report, the Western world was for the first time forced to recognize the serious inequalities in international communication and dissemination order.

The old order is the international communication order that developed countries in Europe and America are leading. They are far ahead of developing countries in terms of technology, capital, talents, market share, etc., and have far-reaching influence on international communication. Even “The international image of BRICS is shaped by the media of developed countries to some extent” (Yan & Liu, 2015, p.104). International communication is largely a persuasive communication (also known as strategic communication): the government or organization mobilizes and coordinates various resources to achieve specific strategic interests. The process of transmitting information and exerting influence includes cognitive improvement, image shaping, identity building, attitude change, value identification and behavior transformation.

According to statistics, “two-thirds of the world’s news come from Western developed countries, which account for only one-seventh of the world’s population. About 80% of the world’s daily news is from Western media. The amount of information flowing from developed countries to developing countries is 100 times that of developing countries flowing to developed countries” (Chen, 2015, pp.76-79). As the largest developing country in the world, China’s

international reporting situation is not optimistic. There are many reasons: the report is not comprehensive, the amount of information is not enough, the timelines are not strong, there is a lack of exclusive information, and most importantly, the lack of national position and value system.

## 5. Analysis of the Causes of Two Different Reports

Fidel Castro and Nelson Mandela have made important contributions in the development of history and occupy an important position. Castro founded the Cuban Communist Party; led Cuban people to overthrow the Batista dictatorship and established the Republic of Cuba. Fidel Castro is a rare success compared to Latin American liberators such as Marty, Bolivar and St. Martin. After nearly a century of failure, the Cuban independence movement was achieved by Castro. At the same time, Castro was also committed to restoring Cuba's economy, promoting Cuba's medical, educational, and energy development. Facing the US economic blockade, political suppression, military threats, and diplomatic isolation, Castro led Cuba to its own road to development, "winning dignity and equality in a strong asymmetry that is adjacent to a superpower that is hostile to itself." (Guo, 2016) Castro was Cuba's leader of independence and liberation. Mandela, who was an "anti-apartheid" fighter, can be described in terms of three stages of his life. He was opposed to the apartheid system through armed violence in the early stage; he was arrested and imprisoned for most of his life, promoting ethnic reconciliation in South Africa in prison; later as President of South Africa, he made great contributions to world peace.

Both of the two are leaders of colonial countries. But in the international world, Mandela's reputation is much higher than Castro's. Mandela represents universal values such as democracy and freedom, and Castro is denied in the ideological field because of his determination to promote socialism and communism.

China is a socialist country and has maintained good relations with Cuba, which is also a socialist country. According to general recognition, Chinese media reports on the death of Castro should reflect different positions from most Western countries and show more commemoration to Castro. However, consulting several famous western media reports on the death of Mandela and Castro, it could be found that the content and reporting framework of Chinese Media are very similar and consistent with western countries. British public media BBC's coverage of Mandela focused on Mandela as a democracy fighter and a pioneer in anti-apartheid; but reports on Castro were more focused on the end of Castro's era, and Cuba welcoming a new world. Some reports even raised questions such as "Will Cubans mourn Castro?" and "Fidel Castro's divisive life", which exaggerated some of the local instability in Castro's political era, ignoring his leadership of Cuba's independence, successful defense to US's economic blockade, and other achievements; moreover, the reports rarely mentioned Cuban people's love for Castro. All of these reflect the unfair view of Castro under the dominant discourse system in the western world. In the report of the Chinese media, following the agenda setting and reporting framework of foreign media, they did not find their own national position.

It should also be noticed that there were different reporting environments for the two when they died. When Mandela died, there were no other hot spots in international news. Mandela was also known as an "old friend of Chinese people" by the Chinese government. His reports do

not need to consider political risks in China. At the same time, the international media reports have also spurred an atmosphere of commemoration. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) even received 1350 complaints from the audience, accusing them of over-reporting of Mandela's death, interrupting the sitcom and interrupting the bad weather report (Xinhua News Agency, 2013). The reporting environment of Castro's death is very different. At that time, there were many international news hotspots: for example, the Korean President Park Geun-hye's confession, the *Brexit*, the Italian constitutional referendum, and the US presidential election. These key events scattered the energy of the media.

It should also be pointed out that CGTN's reporting ability also has a great impact. "The CGTN Africa Headquarters was established in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2010" (Wasserman, Wang & Shen, 2013, pp.71-77) and officially reported on African news in 2012. CGTN has many branches in North America. Once there is sudden international news, there must be more reporters and news resources to provide more and deeper news reports. This can be known from the differences in the reported objects. For Castro, there were very few interviews in the local area in Cuba except for some telephone connections, not to mention interviews with people who are familiar with Castro. When Mandela died, there were not only interviews with local people in South Africa, but also interviews with former presidents, family photographers, prison guards and other prisoners. The difference in the number of reports is much more obvious.

Table 3. Content of the News Reports

	<b>Nelson Mandela</b>	<b>Fidel Castro</b>
<b>News Report Object</b>	Wide circles of Africa (South Africa), Europe	Wide circles of the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, Latin America
	US president Barack Obama delivered a speech, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon delivered a speech, Brazilian president Temer, British prime minister David Cameron, Mandela's successor Mbeki, Russian officials, ANC	China Chairman Xi Jinping
	Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, chairman Xi Jinping, vice chairman Li Yuanchao, China's former ambassador to South Africa	Chairman Xi Jinping, spokesman of the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs
	Mandela's former prisoners and prison guards, Mandela's former bodyguards, Mandela's family photographer	
	The lottery of the world cup mourns Mandela	

### 6. Problems in the Report and Rethinking

Table 4. Castro Reports Title Keyword Frequency Statistics

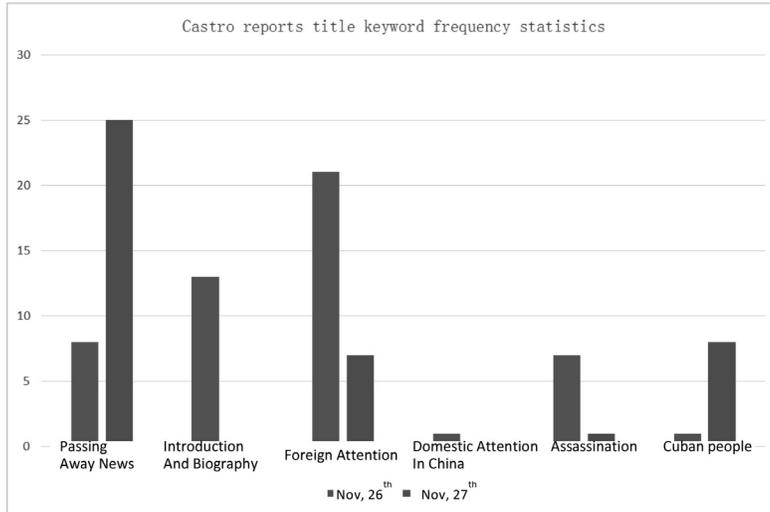


Table 5. Mandela Report Title Keyword Frequency Statistics

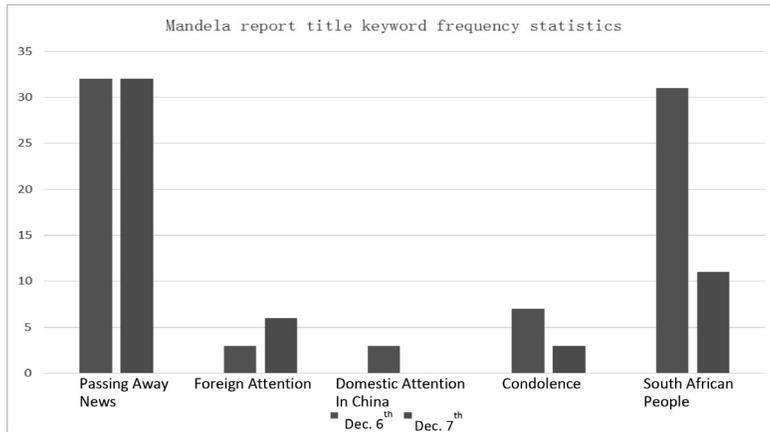


Table 4 and Table 5 compare the statistics of keywords used by Chinese media such as CGTN for Castro and Mandela. Among them, *Foreign Attention* refers to the condolences of leaders from different countries on the death of Castro. *Domestic Attention in China* includes the condolence that Chairman Xi Jinping issued during the first time. *Assassination* refers to a life story that highlights the fact that Castro has suffered assassination attempts many times. Then is the mourning and memory from Cuban people. Looking at the reports of Mandela, *domestic*

*attention in China* is less; there is more news of Mandela's death, international concern and the mourning from South African people.

From the specific content of the report, regarding Mandela, the media was more focused on praising his historical achievements, focusing on his contributions to democracy, freedom and racial equality. As for violent actions such as the symbol of sharp spears that Mandela had used, media tried to cover up and rarely mentioned it. The reports highlighted universal values such as democracy and freedom. Under this care, Mandela is sublimated and his contribution to South Africa is magnified to the level of freedom and liberation of mankind. The reports highlight the western leaders' comments on Mandela. For example, the translation of the US President Barack Obama's memories of Mandela is almost complete. All of these indicate that the Chinese media relied too much on the framework of foreign media as well as international news dissemination order when reporting, and lacked their own news value judgment.

The report on Castro emphasizes that he has experienced numerous assassination attempts and even entered the Guinness Book of World Records. There are also such gimmicks as the so-called hardest life in the world. When reporting Mandela, the gossip news like "Mandela's sign language translation is a fake" and "American, English, and Danish heads play self-portraits" actually appeared in the death report of foreign leaders. Such content is damaging to serious international political news reporting.

The more serious problem is that CGTN, as a representative Chinese media, ignores the content related to the country when reporting international news. The report emphasized the mourning of Mandela in all walks of life in Europe, but lack of mourning for Mandela in China. In contrast to Mandela's contribution to the normalization of Sino-South Africa relations, Castro's contribution to the progress of Sino-Cuba relations was not mentioned. "In the late 1980s, when some countries took the opportunity to impose sanctions in the United Nations, blackballs from two countries shattered their attempts, one is Pakistan and the other is Cuba." (Yang, Zhou, 2010, p.269) "With the support of Castro, Cuba became the first Latin American country to establish diplomatic relations with People's Republic of China." (Wang, 2014, p.321) These contents should have appeared in the report, so that domestic and foreign audiences can understand China's diplomatic situation. However, none of them appeared.

Based on all analysis above, the problem of CGTN's report on Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro's death is obvious. Among all the problems mentioned above, the lack of self-position is the most significant. CGTN is the international communication agency under China Central Television (CCTV). The basic positioning of China Central Television is as national television station of China and national deputy ministerial-level institution. As a news media organization representing Chinese government, every voice of CGTN to the international community represents the position and views of Chinese government, and has a close relationship with national image. On the one hand, its role and status are national; its discourse is oriented to the international community. On the other hand, China is also an important source of audience; only relying on foreign media does not meet the needs of domestic audience. Therefore, the Chinese media represented by CGTN needs to establish a value that is both universal and Chinese, emphasizing its uniqueness on the basis of universality of the world, and not copying the discourse system of other countries' media. For example, in the "3.11 Great Earthquake" in Japan, the situation of overseas Chinese in Japan was not core news information, nor were

there any foreign media reports, but Chinese people need this important information (Zeng & Zhao, 2011, pp. 52-56), which requires the Chinese media to personally interview local sources and obtain accurate information. In the news reports of Castro and Mandela, more information about Sino-Cuba and Sino-South Africa relations would meet the need of Chinese audience, rather than how foreign leaders evaluate these two international figures.

In this regard, Chinese scholar Cai Guofen (2008) proposed four dimensions of “China Value, China Experience, Chinese Story and Chinese Style”. The “Chinese story” is the story of all the survival and struggle that the Chinese nation has experienced since ancient times to today. The “Chinese experience” is a rich experience accumulated in this process. Chinese stories and experiences convey Chinese values and Chinese style. The hard part of telling a Chinese story is to tell what is happening at present. In this globalized and diverse world, past narrative experiences always fail to reach the audience, and the complexity in the real dimensions far exceeds the past. How to clarify, select, tell and judge—these highlight the ability and level of reporting. In the internal international news reports, the reporting ability and reporting level of Chinese media needs to be improved. In foreign news reports, Chinese media should strengthen coverage networks, focus on global events, build communication platforms, further promote the internationalization of Chinese media, and enhance the international voice of Chinese media. In a word, when reporting international news, the Chinese media should also stick to their own views and positions.

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This paper was presented in parallel session at the 25th International Conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS), Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic July 12-15, 2019.